

Crumbling Sidewalks, Sewage Top Indy's Infrastructure Troubles Indianapolis Has Little Money To Cope With Mounting Problems

March 4, 2010
Rick Hightower
WRTV – 6

INDIANAPOLIS -- Crumbling city sidewalks and overflowing sewers in many Indianapolis neighborhoods are on the city's priority list, but that list is long and expensive, Mayor Greg Ballard said.

Ballard and members of the city's Infrastructure Advisory Commission held a third public meeting Wednesday night at Cathedral High School.

The meeting, called a Request for Expression of Interest, deals with the city's billions in infrastructure needs.

While the problem is big, the budget to deal with crumbling roads, bridges and sidewalks and rising sewer and water rates is small, only in the millions of dollars.

The city is considering several options to deal with rising sewer and water rates, including combining the two entities into a single utility and privatizing it. Officials said maintaining the status quo would allow rates to rise drastically.

"We've been trying to get sidewalks here for the past 20 years. I'm actively on the list of calling the Mayor's Action Center for the past 10 years trying to get sidewalks on this block," said downtown resident Freda Boyd, whose sidewalks resemble a demolition site.

The sidewalks are chipped, cracked and crumbled. In some cases, there are no curbs, and large chunks of cement debris block the walkway, impeding pedestrians' right-of-way.

"It's very important," said resident Richard Gray. "Look at the sidewalks with the holes in them. (The elderly) could fall and hurt themselves, and the kids have nowhere to play. They can't walk up and down the sidewalks."

Some neighborhoods have no sidewalks at all, leaving only the street for pedestrians to navigate.

The infrastructure commission said it understands the need is great, but prioritizing billions of dollars in needs, including federally-mandated sewer repairs, with only a few million dollars in funding is an almost impossible task.

"I hear more about sidewalks and drainage than anything else in the city," Ballard said.

When the city gets to fixing sidewalks, it will hit high-traffic thoroughfares first, meaning neighborhoods such as Boyd's will continue to languish.

"I can't have people with disabilities on roads where cars are traveling 50 mph, which I have right now. That scares me to death," Ballard said.

As much as she wants sidewalks, Boyd said she thinks sewage problems should be addressed first.

Indianapolis is getting an additional \$23 million in federal stimulus money to deal with infrastructure issues. That money will be used to resurface streets, fix sidewalks and seal cracks on about 1,400 lane miles. The sewer program will continue through 2025.

"With guidance from the Infrastructure Advisory Commission, we will continue our open and transparent process while working toward the best solution," Ballard said.

The commission shared five priorities it thinks is imperative when considering any change to the utility system.

- The selected approach should contribute to the long-term viability of the city.
- Preference for local/public ownership over privatization
- Rate mitigation should be a top priority.
- Any approach should include a thoughtful plan for the allocation of any proceeds from a transfer.
- Indianapolis must continue to meet federal mandates and regulatory standards.

REI responses received by the city fall into five general categories:

- Transfer the waterworks and wastewater assets to a newly-formed nonprofit entity.
- Combine the waterworks and wastewater operations and capital program management.
- Transfer the waterworks and wastewater assets to a newly-created corporation in exchange for equity ownership.
- Offer to address discrete problems or issues of the waterworks and wastewater utilities.
- Transfer ownership and operations of the waterworks and wastewater utilities to Citizens Energy Group.
- Based on its review and analysis of the REI responses, the city has come up with five options:
- Maintain the status quo, allowing rates to continue to rise at drastic levels because of federal mandates and infrastructure challenges.
- At the city level, combine the waterworks and wastewater utilities into a single utility and engage a private operator to operate the newly created utility.
- Sell the utilities to a private, for-profit entity and completely privatize the utilities.
- Transfer the systems to a newly created, city controlled, nonprofit and contract with a private vendor.
- Transfer the ownership and operations of the utilities to Citizens Energy Group, a public charitable trust that would hold the utilities for the benefit of the city.